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SALTER, WILLIAM M.

*TITLE:*

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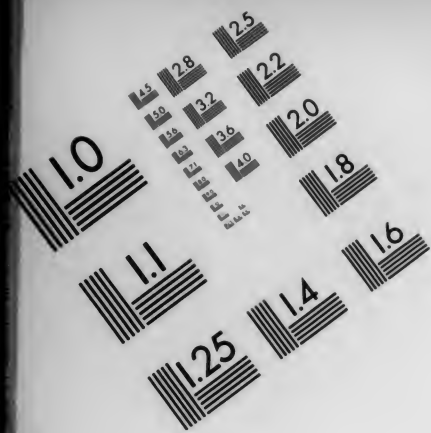
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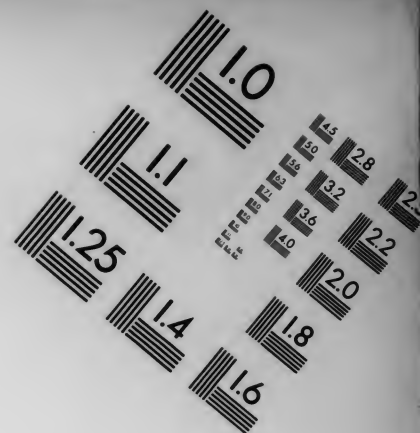
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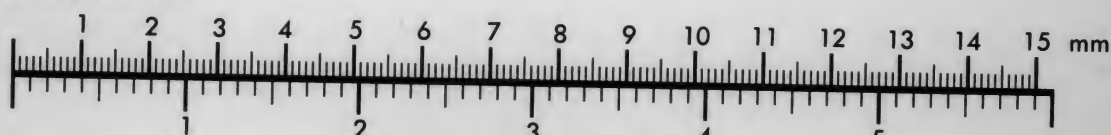
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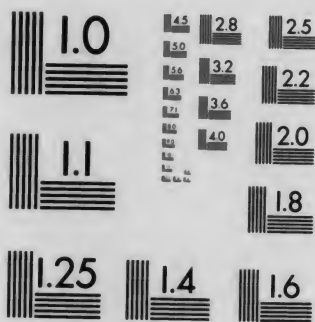
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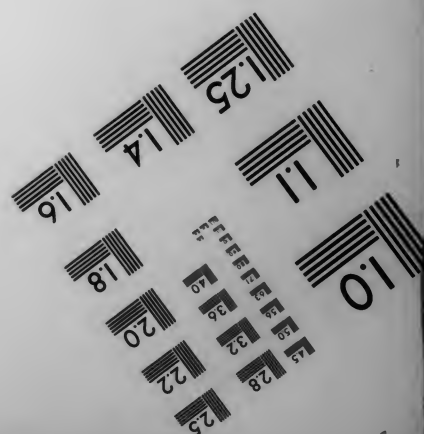
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## THE FIRST THING IN LIFE

BY

WILLIAM M. SALTER.

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## THE FIRST THING IN LIFE.\*

BY WILLIAM M. SALTER.

IN a grave moment the question may arise, What is the first, the most important, thing in life? Ordinarily we are concerned about other things; often we may be troubled and anxious in our minds—and yet at just such times we may ask, what is best worth troubling about, what among the things we care for is that thing we could least afford to miss or lose? And perhaps we cannot answer at once. May we not at an hour like this—an hour set apart for reflection over the higher concerns of life—take it up? What is that first, that essential thing in life, which if we have we may put up with the loss of many other things, but if we have not, we have missed the mark altogether?

Sometimes it is said the first thing in life is to be well. Health is the best wealth, said Emerson. Self-preservation is the first law of nature, is a common saying. And in one sense it is true. We must surely have a measure of health if we are to do anything or become anything in the world. No one can over-estimate this blessing. One of the worst things about the lack of health is that we have to spend a great deal of valuable time in simply trying to get it. And yet the very fact that we can speak of it in this way shows that we do not regard it as an end in itself. No one could say that the worst thing about a lack of knowl-

\* A Lecture given before the Ethical Societies of Philadelphia, Chicago and St. Louis.



edge is that we have to spend a great deal of valuable time in trying to get it. Health (or some measure of it) is the possibility of doing anything. Without this material basis of life we are nothing—our loves, our thoughts, our strivings of every sort vanish away. But it is a basis for something. With our roots in the ground we are to grow. On this foundation we are to build a structure. Suppose a person were so anxious about the foundation that he forgot to build his house: he would not be more irrational than one who viewed a perfect physical condition as anything else than a chance, an opportunity, for something beyond itself. Plainly, all we can mean by "first" in connection with health is, first in order of time—just as the foundation must come first, although the reason for the foundation is the house.

The same line of thought applies to the idea of getting-on, of money-making, that we are so familiar with in this country. Undoubtedly this as a matter of fact is the first thing in life to many people among us. Yet no one in his senses—not the most confirmed money-getter, I think, when he stops to reflect—would say that money was more than a means to an end; would say that wealth, however useful and however necessary, was so with any other purpose in view than to make possible of attainment a full and rich human life.

Health, comfort, wealth—these are all means, machinery by which to accomplish something; but it is a sad and an inglorious mistake to stop with them, to make them an end in life, to sacrifice higher things for them, to become stunted in our spiritual being for the sake of them—as, alas! many do. What is it to be sound and fair in body, and to have no soul? What is it to be successful in business, a prosperous workman,

or manufacturer, or merchant, and have no thoughts, no interests, beyond one's shop, or office, or counting-room?

Granting then that what is of supreme moment in life is beyond these things, shall we locate it in some definite higher attainment such as intellectual culture or the development of the heart, or shall we try to settle whether our first duty is to ourselves or to society, or whether science or art or religion or politics is the most pressing concern of man? But what broadly-thinking person will deny that all these objects are of importance? I confess for myself it seems invidious to *distinguish* between these higher interests and to say of some of them, It is of the greatest moment. Science, art, religion, politics, self-improvement and social improvement, and the cultivation of every faculty of our being—all, it would seem, have their place.

No, I do not care to draw invidious distinctions. I do not even wish to emphasize morality (in the ordinary limited sense of the word) and to say after Matthew Arnold that conduct is three-fourths of life, leaving art and science to divide the other fourth between them. In one sense science is as necessary to man as morality is—yes, as necessary to morality itself, since without science, that is, without light, knowledge, morality may go astray, and we may be blind leaders of the blind; and art feeds and embodies one aspect of the human spirit as truly as "morality" does another. The real good for man is no one thing; when we turn the matter over in our minds we see that nothing short of a total perfection can satisfy us—a full, all-round development of humanity, a perfect social state and every faculty of every individual in play in it. The various single goods

we may rationally strive for are but parts of this or steps towards it or conditions of it. They are good just as every forward movement on a journey is good, or every preparation for it, or everything that outwardly facilitates it, because all help in bringing us to the journey's end.

What I would propose as the first thing in life is just the will toward this all-inclusive good of which I speak—the aim for it. For here are really two things—the ideal as I have described it, unattained and far off, only a possibility as yet, and, on the other hand, ourselves as we are, yet capable of willing and striving for the ideal. Of course, to a certain extent the ideal may be attained without conscious thought or effort of ours by the co-operation of causes and circumstances outside of us; with that, or nature's action in the matter, we have nothing to do. But to a large extent the attainment of the wished for end may depend upon ourselves; and with this part of the process we have everything to do. According as we think now and act and will, progress to the goal may be easy or hard, sure or uncertain, rapid or slow. Nay, since the end of which I have spoken is in essence a spiritual end, is, I mean, a certain state or perfection of spiritual beings (for this is what science, art, civilization, justice really are), it must be won by us in a far deeper sense than it can be given to us. Our aim, our will, our effort, become thereby indispensable. Now it is just this aim, this effort, this good will on which I wish to enlarge. I wish to show and make you feel that it is the greatest thing in life—not greatest in comparison with other things, but greatest as the condition of all other things, greatest as the fountain from which they flow, itself richer than

any single product of it can possibly be. Practically it is a very simple thing. The man with a good will may be far from perfection; but there is one thing that can be said of him, and that is that when he is aware of anything that is good, he instinctively leans that way and tries for it. It makes little difference what the good thing is—if he recognizes it as better than he is or has or is doing, he straightway reaches after it, if it is at all within his grasp. The good may differ in detail for different individuals. We are in different circumstances, at different stages of the journey, so to speak. But the *good will* is the same in all; it may be identically the same for the man of the largest knowledge, of the finest character, and for him who is but taking his first steps in wisdom and in virtue and is stumbling at that. In both cases, in all cases, it is an upward look, an onward effort—and this alone it is that has vital, absolute significance. For, think of it, if one is intent on what is good (*i. e.*, because it is good), it follows that while he may seek one thing now, he will seek another thing at another time and still another at another, and so run through the whole scale of what is good, as the opportunity and need arise. If a child learns to do what is right simply because it is right and he ought to do it, he will in the same way do what is right when he is a man, though the particular things be different.

There is great misunderstanding about doing what is right because it is right or loving what is good because it is good. It is sometimes spoken of as an irrational thing. But without going into the whole question, I think it can easily be shown that there *is* a sense in which doing or seeking what is good because it is good is reasonable. For granted that a thing is really good

(either in itself or with reference to some end beyond it), it may be regarded in either of two ways—either as to what particular thing it is (*e. g.*, learning a lesson or casting a vote or overthrowing some oppression), or as regards the general form which we give to it when we say it is a good thing to do. Many different things may be alike in being good, though they are very unlike one another. Hence by a process of abstraction and generalization (which even a child is familiar with, though it may not know them by these names), we may separate out the goodness of the actions and consider it apart from the particular content with which in each case it is associated. In a word, we may form the general idea of good (and the same is true of right), and this idea, like any other idea, may become a ground of action. Though we don't wish to do a certain thing, yet if we come to realize that it would be a good thing our aversion may be overcome, as, for example, when we take a disagreeable medicine or witness for some unpopular cause in public. The good simply as good may come to have a certain power over us; once convinced that a thing is right, we may not need to have anything more said to us—we will to do it. There is surely nothing unintelligible or unreasonable about this—it is not inconsistent with a thousand and one considerations to determine what is good or what is right, it only means that when this is once determined we ask no more—we are ready to act. Hence, while learning a lesson may be in itself no reason for casting a vote, and while casting a vote may be in itself no reason for remedying a social injustice, if we have learned a lesson in childhood *because it was the right and good thing to do*, this may be a reason for

casting a vote now if it is also the right and good thing to do, and in fact it is a reason for doing every right and good thing under the sun (that is in our power), whether it be aiding some workingmen who are struggling at a disadvantage or rising against a political boss or working for "a parliament of man, a federation of the world." If you do anything that is good, really because it is good, you are in consistency bound to do everything that is good that you can do. And this is what I mean by the good will—the will bound to the good, loyal to it, taking it as a principle, and so seeking all good, or if it ever fails and lapses, as indeed it often may, picking itself up, righting itself, asserting itself anew.

This good will, rationally speaking, cannot stop short of aiming at that total development of humanity of which I spoke at first, with all the riches of science and art and civilization and a perfect social state it implies; possibly, when the metaphysics of the matter are thoroughly thought out, we cannot avoid feeling that this good will is but our human response to another and a Higher Will—"the Will that asks our will," as Mrs. Humphrey Ward says—the Will that is the ground and spring of all the progress that is in the world; but meantime one may have this good will who never heard of the "total development of humanity" and who has no consciousness of a Higher Will. The good will may be in all, whatever their age (so they can discriminate ideas at all), whatever their circumstances, whatever their stage of culture, however little or however great their opportunities and however little or however great their power to make use of the opportunities. It is not measured by what we do, but by what we would do if

we could—not even by what we are, but by what we want to be. Ineffectual it may be, and yet real. Blind it may be and yet have its own value. It may even go astray or lead astray, and yet never need conversion, but only enlightenment. Its very errors may be worth more than the correct behavior of others which is without a ground of principle.

And now with this, I trust, measurably clear idea of what I mean by the good will, let us see how deep and how great a thing it is in life and how necessary its culture is as compared with that of any of the single, definite objects about which we concern ourselves. What a spring of life and action anyone has in him who has a good will! Contrast him with an indifferent person, one who has no preferences, no choices, and no feeling that he must do one thing and not another! It is a matter of chance how such people go, or rather, from sheer inertia, they are apt to go, as they have gone or as others go about them. They have no originaive power; they do not lead the world onward. The world is full of people who have nothing positive about them, who have no strong leaning in any direction, whom it is hard to win for any cause, who think of themselves and of their families, perhaps, but of little or nothing beyond. How different with those who have a ready response to whatever their reason discerns to be good; to whom it is enough if a cause is in the line of progress to make them ready and glad to help it! It does not matter so much what the good thing is—it may be the founding of a hospital, it may be the endowing of a university, it may be some plan for beautifying the city, it may be some needed political or social reform—the people of good will, generous and ready and loyal, are those who

make it go. Nothing can atone for the lack of this aggressive quality. Health and wealth do not take the place of it; scientific attainments do not take the place of it; artistic capabilities do not take the place of it—for one may stop with these things and have no spring of action beyond them. Nay, with the lack of a good will, these things themselves may be shorn of the blessing they might otherwise be to the world, and may even work harm. Science and invention may of themselves make it possible to do injury to the race as well as good; even art may render effeminate and pander to what is base as well as to what is noble; and what we call civilization may raise as many problems as it may solve if it is a one-sided thing and is not guided, inspired, by moral purpose. All other things seem to require direction; good will is the director. If things do not come from a pure source, they require continual righting and correcting. There is deep truth in Emerson's contention that the moral sentiment "lies at the foundation of society."

I do not forget that the good purpose may go astray, may make mistakes; that intelligence or science is as necessary as good will. But this hardly means that intelligence or science can be a guide of itself; and, on the other hand, if the will for good is strong, it will in time correct its mistakes, and beget intelligence or science—its very will for what is good will make it do so, to the end that it may really accomplish what is good, just as the good physician will out of love for his patients be driven to observe and study and find out true remedies. Love or good will does not take the place of knowledge, but it may lead to the acquirement of knowledge as nothing else can. It may make one a



pupil and always a pupil of whatever observation or experience or history have to teach.

I do not forget, either, that good will without good acts is of little value. But it is a spurious good will that does not pass into acts. Real good will can no more be hindered from issuing in good deeds than a fountain can be kept from flowing. It is but the idea and the anticipation and the purpose of good deeds. Of course, I say all this on the supposition that there are no external hindrances; sickness and other causes may keep a man from acting, but where a man *can* act and does not, this really shows not that there can be a separation between the intention and the deed, but that the intention or good will did not exist, that it was a mere sentiment, or half-indulged wish, that some other wish or disposition was stronger than it. Hell may be paved with good intentions in the sense of idle wishes and empty resolutions and watery sentiments, but it is not paved with good will—even if, owing to accidental circumstances, the will was not carried into effect. Good will, we may more truly say, makes the very climate of heaven; it is that without which good acts themselves, externally considered, lose all their savor and worth and sweetness.

To awaken or quicken the good will in a man is thus the deepest, the most radical service you can do him. It is more than giving him knowledge, for it is stirring the disposition to use knowledge and to get knowledge for himself. It is more than persuading him to a good act—it is putting in him a principle from which good acts will come of themselves. It is more than making him temperate or truthful or chaste—it is giving him a spirit that will lead him to acquire these and all other

virtues. For it is one and the same spirit which, as Emerson says, is differently named love, justice, temperance, in its different applications, only as the ocean receives different names on the several shores which it washes. It is surely more to open up a well of life in a person than to give him a few bucketfuls of water, however pure and wholesome the water may be. This is the profound meaning of the old doctrine of regeneration, and hence arises the well-founded distrust of the old religious order as to the efficacy of any mere preaching of morality, in the sense of outward acts and habits. Nothing will answer but a new creature. Hence, too, the secondary nature of temperance societies and white cross societies and organizations to promote special measures and special reforms. There is wanted a sea of good will to float them. They are necessary, but something else is more necessary still—the power, the readiness to go along these lines, just as a head of water when once made descends and goes easily and naturally, of itself as we say, along a dozen different channels to enrich the land or turn the wheels of industry.

And yet, may it not be said, however great the good will is, is not the attainment of the ends to which the good will itself is directed the greatest thing? We ethical teachers are sometimes good-naturedly warned against the danger of making morality an end in and of itself.\* And I recognize that morality is a means rather than an end, that the good will or purpose aims always at some good beyond itself. And perhaps it would have to be admitted that if all the good we can

\*E. g., by Dr. F. E. White, in *International Journal of Ethics*, July, 1895, p. 486.

conceive of were realized, there would no longer be any occasion for a good will. If I may use such an illustration without irreverence, I suppose that God could not be said to have a good will or purpose—all that he could desire he is conceived of as having or being already; he is the plenitude, the perfection of being—can want nothing or will nothing. Of course, he may have a will or purpose for his creatures, but not for himself—there is nothing beyond him. Now, if we had all we desire (or could conceivably desire), the good will might cease, for the good itself is the ultimate end. But need I ask my fellow human beings how the case actually stands with us? Surely we have not all the good we desire, and when we do for a moment compass what we want we generally soon find that there is some other good that we have not attained. We are individually, and humanity is collectively, like people climbing some mountain height—we think we have gone a considerable way, and lo! the summit is far on beyond us. Nay, in humanity's ascent there seems to be no summit. We are always reaching beyond anything we have attained to, and it may be the heavens will witness our race, when the term of its tenancy on the earth is reached, still stretching out its hands to what is beyond. Perhaps, after all, we are children of Infinity, never content and never meant to be content; at least this seems to be the character of some races of men. The insatiableness of the human mind, the insatiableness of the human heart, the insatiableness of human energy and will, we, at least, who live in our Western world know, for we have the evidence of it in our science, in our social aspirations and in our endless and ever-renewed conquests over nature.

But if this is so, the good will has a practically limitless significance. It is not indeed greater than all good, but it is greater than any good we know. The scientific instinct is more valuable than any present scientific acquirements;\* it would cease if all knowledge were attained; but as things are it is the very means of opening new and wider fields. Better than any truth is the love of truth. So I say, better than any good is the love of good—greater than any attainment is the good will; practically and taking things as we know them, this and nothing less is the root principle of progress, which ever leads man on. In our daily lives we reach one stage of virtue and then we find there is another beyond us. We solve one intellectual problem and find ourselves conducted to others. In our social relations we accomplish one reform and then discern that another is needed. Modern political society got freedom, liberty to govern itself, with the French Revolution and our War for Independence; and now it finds it has to get something else, if it is to continue or even to have peace where it stands. It is not enough in any department of life to cling to what is: we must have more, and the bottom impulsion to the more is what I mean by the good will. The very thing we set so high a value upon—character—may be narrow, and want life, impulse, plasticity, to make it truly great. There are those we call excellent people in a way, and yet how small the way is! For example, they never lie, they never steal, they never over-eat or over-drink, they never commit adultery, and yet they care feebly for pub-

\* "The scientific spirit is of more value than its products and irrationally held truths may be more harmful than reasoned errors."—Huxley, in *Science and Culture*, p. 319.

lic affairs and are poor citizens. Or they may be among what are called good citizens and yet without any deep sense of social justice. Their goodness has got petrified; it has no longer a living background and spring of good will. And because they rest in and are contented with what of virtue they have, it may be actually easier sometimes to wake up some person who has little or no virtue at all than one of your model husbands, model business men, or model citizens. Character itself, the best and solidest framework of virtues you can get, needs the inspiring quality of a good will behind it to keep it alive, to keep it open and plastic, to make it responsive to the unattained, to make it impossible to say of its possessor that he is "dead in righteousness," as others may be dead in their sins. Yes, even greater than character in any such form as we ordinarily find it, is the good will that makes character and that can make ever a better and a better one.

One thought more. Who does not feel that the strong direction of the will toward a worthy object is itself a good thing, just as strong and hardy muscles are themselves admirable as part of our idea of a perfect physical frame? This is the significance of Lessing's famous saying, I suppose, that if God held out "truth" in one hand and "seek after truth" in another, he should in all humility take "seek after truth." To have the truth is great, but to *gain* the truth is somehow greater. There is a certain glory in the development of human faculties themselves—it may be even better at any one time not to have the truth, or to have a wrong idea about it, than to have it, however perfectly, without effort of our own. For my own part, I feel this deeply about the striving of a good will, and I could

paraphrase Lessing's language by saying if God held out to me "good" in one hand and "strive for good" in another, I should take "strive for good;" for I know of no other way in which the good could become really mine, in which it could become inwoven and ingrained into the fibers of my inward being. In fact, I will waive all reserves (and it may go as a personal confession, whether you can agree to it or not,) and say that to me, of all mortal excellencies, daring in a good cause is the greatest; that the good will or purpose is the sublimest thing I know of; that it is this or the signs of it that readiest move me to tears and to admiration; that wit, that genius, that talent, that achievement even, may all leave me cold, but that the strong purpose of a good man touches me, awes me, in an indescribable manner, and does so no less, or shall I say more, when I see it laboring in the face of difficulties and contending against great odds.

And now, friends, whether you can assent to just this or not, if you agree at all to what I have been saying, you will admit that two things follow. The first is, that all of us have a question to address to ourselves—namely, have we this good will or purpose in our hearts? No one can know, no one can test this but ourselves. And even for us it may be sometimes hard to tell. We have good wishes, but have we a good will? We do not mean to do wrong, but do we mean to do right, all that is right, right on principle? It is a hard saying, but unless we do, we have not really a good will. If we willingly make exceptions we are lost. If we pick and choose, if we say this I will do, but that is hard, distasteful, and I will not even try, we are not really bound to duty, but only, however we may disguise it, to our own



pleasure. All that are *called* our duties may not *be* duties, and the settling that is an intellectual process; but when we know what our duty is, there is nothing under heaven but to do it—at least try to do it—however repellant it may be, however much it taxes us to make the effort.

Secondly, we see the place and the function of an Ethical Society. Such a society is not formed to cultivate any one virtue, but the germ of all the virtues. The morality it furthers is a life, a process, an unfolding—not a good habit or two, but a principle that will not allow one to rest till he reaches the stature of a perfect man; not a reform or two, but something that will not allow us to rest short of a perfect society. It is a certain spirit we try to feed men by, it is a certain temper and spirit we try to develop in private hearts, and, so far as we can, in the sentiment and life of the community. Let us, I pray you, dedicate ourselves afresh to this task, and more and more as the years go on may our Ethical Movement elevate and refine the temper and spirit of men and hasten the advent of a happier order of society!

EW-m.

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By William M. Salter

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